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ABSTRACT

This study compared teacher beliefs before and after participation in a pilot project designed to promote parental involvement in Catholic schools. The project, K-12 Professional Development Program: Parent Teacher Partnerships through Personal Development Education, involved K-12 teachers from six primary and secondary Catholic schools in a coastal Australian town. The program worked to band teachers in self-supporting networks and provide opportunities for self-identified inservice activities. Teachers were involved in a process through which they identified ways for teachers and families to work together toward partnerships at the classroom level. To investigate the effectiveness of the project, researchers collected data from an initial survey of teacher beliefs and practices and repeated the administration of the survey at the completion of the professional development activities. The researchers also examined journals and conducted interviews with participants. Data analysis indicated that teachers had concerns about demands on their professional time related to increased interaction with parents, while at the same time they strongly valued contact with parents. The teachers were confused about effective strategies for enabling parent involvement. Changes in teachers' attitudes reflected increased understanding about parents and the importance of parental involvement. There were significant gender differences in their responses. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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ED 424 217

TIME FOR PARENTS:

A BELIEF OR PRACTICE?

by

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Time for parents? A belief or a practice?

ABSTRACT

The involvement of parents in schools has been shown to have significant effects on student achievement. Catholic schools have a defined policy related to the importance of parent—teacher partnership across all levels of schooling. However the practices of parental involvement often fall short of the rhetoric. Trends in research have indicated that within schools, teachers have a pivotal role in promoting parental involvement. Consequently, a pilot project was instigated with a cohort of teachers (K-12) from primary and secondary Catholic schools in a coastal Australian town. This paper reports a comparison of teacher beliefs before and after participation in the project and discusses the implications of the findings for curriculum decision making in schools. To investigate the effectiveness of this project, data were collected from an initial survey of teacher beliefs and practices and a repeat administration of this survey at the completion of the professional development activities. Findings indicate teacher concerns about demands on their professional time through increased interaction with parents whilst at the same time strongly valuing contact with parents.

Background

Many theorists and researchers have asserted the value of positive home-school relationships if children are to receive maximum benefit from their education. Children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health and long-term aspiration have also been shown to be affected by family endorsement of school (Greenberg, 1989). Developmental gains in children's language, motor skills, concepts and problem solving have also been associated with parental involvement (Swick & McNight, 1989). Whereas the literature reveals the existence of differing perceptions of parents and educators on the nature of parental involvement (Jackson & Stretch, 1976; Power, 1985; Williams, 1991), when it comes to instigating participation, teachers have been identified as the key to actualising positive parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brassie, 1987; Swick & McNight, 1989).

Several recent studies (Clark, 1988; Powell, 1989; Pugh, 1988) suggest that the quality of parent-teacher relationships and the practices of parental involvement and partnership do not reflect recommendations of educational reports and existing research. One such report is that of the Schools Council report **Australia's Teachers: The next decade** in which it is noted that there is an increase in the isolation of schools from the communities in which they are situated and which they serve, particularly where those communities "don't conform to the middle-class norms associated with schooling" (1990, p.81).

Research findings on the importance of parental involvement indicate that teachers and teacher beliefs are key issues allied to parental participation in schools. However teachers are for the most part ill-prepared and ill-equipped through their preservice training to communicate with parents. Typically teachers with an early childhood focus will have undertaken studies related to families and home school community relationships whereas secondary teachers have had no formal introduction to the area. The challenge exists to identify professional development opportunities for teachers at all school levels to develop practical strategies for fostering parent teacher communication and increasing parental participation.

Action research has a fundamental aim to improve practice not just to produce knowledge by developing the practitioner's capacity for discrimination and judgement (Elliott, 1991). This process integrates teaching and teacher development, curriculum development and evaluation, research and philosophical reflection, into a unified conception of reflective educational practice and results in the

empowerment of teachers in their workplace (Elliot, 1991). The key activity is the collaborative reflection by teachers on their practices in curriculum development and implementation.

This paper reports on the preliminary findings on teacher perceptions of parent participation associated with involvement in an action research based professional development program. The research question to be answered focused on whether there would be changes in teacher perceptions after undertaking such professional development.

Setting of the study

A pilot project, *K-12 Professional Development Program: Parent Teacher Partnerships through Personal Development Education* was implemented in six Catholic schools in a provincial, coastal town. Facilitated by personnel from Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, the professional development program revolved around three activities: twilight seminars, action research by teachers and collaboration by teachers in action research teams/triads (Arthur, et al, 1994). As a fully managed action learning model of in-service, the *K-12 Professional Development Program* aimed to bond teachers in self supporting networks and provide opportunities for self-identified in-service activities. This approach also aimed to involve teachers in collaborative reflection on their teaching practice through action planning for direct changes in practice related to parent teacher partnerships. A further potential outcome was engendering critical changes in the professional culture across the band of teachers K-12. Embedding this activity within a facilitated professional development process aimed to provide the motivation which may be necessary to initiate reflection among teachers who already perceive themselves as overloaded with professional demands. Teachers were involved in a process through which they identified ways for teachers and families to work towards partnerships at the classroom level. Implied in this process was the need to establish what beliefs about partnership are held in particular school contexts.

An action research process was used through which teacher needs for inservice were identified and individual research plans developed. The process was supplemented with workshops for professional knowledge input. This project offered teachers the chance to individually address their professional development in parent teacher partnerships whilst collaboratively supporting other teachers in their professional development. The action research teams formed operated where possible across the traditional boundaries of schooling with team members drawn from primary and secondary schools.

Methodology

Participants

Teachers from six Catholic parish schools — three primary and three campuses of a secondary school — were invited to participate in the project. Of the 14 teachers who completed the project, 11 were involved in the administration of the *Home School Communication Survey*. Six participants, five female and one male, were from primary schools, four (two female and two male) were from the junior secondary campus 7-10, and two (both male) were from the senior secondary school. The teaching experiences ranged from 6 years to over 20 years experience across diverse settings in Australia and overseas.

Data collection

Data for the study were gathered using various techniques; survey, journals and interviews. (Arthur & Bingham, 1994).. The findings reported in this paper are based on data from the survey and interviews.

Home School Communication Survey

In order to investigate the trend in teacher perceptions of parents and parental involvement, paired data were collected on a before and after basis. The Home School Communication Survey (adapted

from Owen & Krasnow, 1992) was administered to the teachers at the introductory and concluding sessions for the *K-12 Professional Development Program: Parent Teacher Partnerships through Personal Development Education*. The survey was designed to gather data on teacher beliefs and practices related to partnerships with parents. Particular items focused on issues of communication. There were six sections to the survey, with respondents required to indicate either agreement, importance or comfort with statements in four of the sections. The remaining sections surveyed the frequency of teacher practices of communication.

Interviews

A series of interviews were held with the participants structured around the participants journal entries and any previous interview comments. There was at least one interview and a follow up interview with individual participants. One group interview was held with members of triads. All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed and coded according to teacher gender and year level taught. Three clusters were used for year levels: primary (K-6), lower secondary (7-10) and upper secondary (11-12). Mean scores for each of the groups were identified and used to compare trends in teacher perceptions over the course of the professional development program. The data analysed in this paper were from two sections of the survey that related to teacher perceptions and beliefs about parents.

Results and Discussion

Results

The following discussion deals with key findings from compared before and after responses related to the first two sections of the survey. Results are reported for both gender and year level.

Items 1-7

The first section of the survey was a set of seven statements which were scored on a four point scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Table 1 shows these statements.

Table 1.

		strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
1.	Parents and teachers should decide together what is taught in schools.				
2.	Students learn the most when parents and teachers have mutually agreed upon goals for their education.				
3.	Information from school fails to inform parents about school programs and student progress.				
4.	Teachers should help parents learn specific ways to help their child at home.				
5.	Parents and teachers have different educational goals for students.				
6.	Students learn the most when parents and teachers work together.				
7.	Teachers have enough to do without having to try to involve parents.				

In terms of gender, there were no significant changes in responses to items 1, 3 and 5, whereas there were changes in responses for both male and female participants to items 2, 4, 6 and 7. Results are reported below showing the before and after mean scores on a gender basis for items 2 and 4. These reflect a trend from agreement to strong agreement, as shown in the change to a lower mean score.

2. Students learn the most when parents and students have mutually agreed upon goals for their education.		
	before	after
females	2.0	1.8
males	1.8	1.6

4. Teachers should help parents learn specific ways to help their child at home.		
	before	after
females	2.0	1.5
males	2.0	1.6

As with the above items there was a shift in the level of agreement for item 6, however for this item the shift was quite significant for female participants.

6. Students learn the most when parents and teachers work together		
	before	after
females	1.8	1.0
males	1.6	1.2

There was also a sizeable shift in teacher response to item 7. Again, this was most evident for the female participants and will be discussed later. This was a negatively worded statement, therefore the mean score is higher if there is disagreement with the statement. Appendix A contains graphs of the results from items 6 and 7 coded for gender.

7. Teachers have enough to do without having to try to involve parents.		
	before	after
females	2.4	2.8
males	2.8	3.5

Analysis by year level supported the trend in item 6 for both primary and lower secondary responses with no change at the upper secondary level. This reflects the gender factor in the data as there are no female respondents in the upper secondary area. Appendix B contains graphs of mean scores for items 6 and 7 on a year level basis. The results for item 7 confirm the shift towards disagreement with the negative statement across all year levels.

Items 8-17

The second section of the survey analysed for this paper investigated perceptions of teacher confidence in relation to parents as both parents and teachers. These were rated similarly to items 1-7 using a four point scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Table 2 shows these statements.

Table 2.

I am confident that the parents of my students:		strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
8.	are doing a good job in helping their children learn academic subjects at home				
9.	respect me as a competent teacher.				
10.	care about their children.				
11.	are doing a good job in teaching their children to follow rules and directions				
12.	are doing a good job in helping their children resolve conflicts with peers.				
13.	are doing a good job in encouraging their children's self esteem.				
14.	are doing a good job in encouraging their children to have positive attitudes towards learning.				
15.	are doing a good job in helping their children understand moral and ethical responsibilities				
16.	are doing a good job in participating in their children's education.				
17.	are doing a good job in disciplining their child.				

Across all these items, teacher responses varied. Items 8 to 11 saw no change in male scores however there were changes in female responses, with significant changes for items 9 and 10. The downward trend in female responses was not matched by male responses which remained relatively static. Reverse trends were shown for items 14 and 16 with females moving toward greater agreement and males towards lesser agreement. Appendix C contains graphs for gender on items 9, 10, 14 and 16.

Further analysis compared the responses across year levels. As stated previously, participants were grouped according to year level taught, with three groups used: primary (K-6), lower secondary (7-10) and upper secondary (11-12). Appendix D contains graphs of the results of items with significant shifts in perceptions (Items 9, 10, 14 and 16). Analysis by year level revealed the same or lower means across primary and lower secondary. However for items 14 and 16 there was a significant change in response from confidence to less confidence in upper secondary.

Discussion

This research has been undertaken with a small sample of teachers. Whilst there is a balance across the genders in total, there is an imbalance in the representation of the genders across the levels of teaching. In the primary area (NSW K-6) there were 5 female and 1 male participants, whereas in the upper secondary area there were 2 participants, both male. Lower secondary respondents were equally distributed across genders.

Notwithstanding the nature of the sample and that fact that the participants were volunteers and therefore may be an atypical sample, we can conclude that there were significant gender differences in the responses. To what extent the changes in response were due to the program is uncertain and yet it can be said that the changes occurred at the completion of the professional development program. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the change in responses reflects increased understanding by teachers about parents and the importance of parental involvement. In this research the variables of gender and year level could not be factored separately. It appears that the traditional view of parental involvement decreasing with increased grade level may be reflected in teacher understanding and responsiveness to parental involvement. Teacher concerns related to diminished contact over the school life of the child have been reported elsewhere (Arthur & Bingham, 1994).

Despite the size of this population of particular note are the implications of the female responsiveness to facilitated action research being greater than that of males. There are three probable factors involved in the increase in female response overall. Firstly, the teachers gained affirmation from parents about their role as teacher. This was particularly reported in item 9 in which there was a significant change in the perception of female teachers that parents considered them competent with responses moving from agreement to strong agreement. Analysis of data from the interviews revealed that through the implementation of action research plans, teachers experienced positive encounters with parents. Secondly, there was widespread comment from female teachers about one of the readings provided which related to the professional image of teachers. During the *K-12 Professional Development Program*, a range of articles related to parental involvement and communication were provided to teachers to supplement the face-to-face inservice sessions. These provided teachers with background reading and they were encouraged to discuss these with their action research triad colleagues. Several teachers reported on changes in their ideas about communicating with parents and the need to project a professional image as a result of reading these materials. Thus the change reported in teacher perceptions could be said to be an indication of teachers being conscious of the need to promote a professional competent image. The third factor that could influence female responses may be found in teacher motivation to join the program. For the most part the female teachers saw the inservice as an opportunity to learn something while *meeting with people they meant to catch up with* (interview comment). These teachers also reported on the relationships developed through the triad interactions. The male teachers on the other hand were not so motivated by what they can gain from others but rather what they could gain for themselves as teachers. The complexity of the differences between male and female responses needs further investigation.

With teacher professionalism high on the agenda for public debate in Australia at present, it is of interest that teachers responded they were confident that parents respected their competence as teachers. However the exception to this was in the follow up results for the two participants (male) in the upper secondary area (11-12). Both teachers reported in interviews some disappointment and frustration with parents as a result of the implementation of action plans which involved parents attending meetings at the school. Both teachers were focusing on improving the motivation of students in year 11 and were working with a small cohort of students and parents. Neither teacher had previously implemented any parent education programs. It may be possible that the lack of experience working with parents in this field combined with perceived poor response from parents served to undermine their previous positive perception that parents were doing a good job helping their children in their education. Again there is insufficient evidence to delineate between gender and year level as

integral factors in the results. The complexities of teacher thinking cannot be isolated from their everyday classroom experiences. In the upper secondary level, such experiences do not involve parents and are very different from teachers in the primary grades where contact with parents may be on a daily basis.

Conclusion

Whatever the classroom, however, the pivotal factor in working with parents is time. This research has considered the beliefs that teachers held with regard to parental involvement. It has been shown that teachers *have time* for parents. That is to say they are disposed positively towards parents as educators of their children and as collaborators with teachers in education and learning. The results have indicated strong support and confidence in parents.

Teachers in Catholic schools operate under explicit and implicit expectations that parents are a vital part of the school. However many teachers are illprepared to work with parents or may find that the opportunities they afford parents are not fully utilised. Thus teachers are often confused about effective strategies to enable parent involvement to occur to a level which matches their expectations. Such expectations appear to be based on year level taught, gender and previous experiences. Whilst the question of teacher gender and year level have yet to be decided, it is of interest to note that the research indicates that teacher attitudes at the secondary level do not reflect the significant differences in reported drop off of parental involvement as children go higher in grades. This is an area for further research.

One critical factor in determining practices of parent-teacher relationships has been identified as teacher efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987; Swick and McNight, 1989) which refers simplistically to teacher confidence. Challenges to teacher belief in themselves as professional is occurring at an increasing rate with outside pressures impinging on classrooms and teacher time. The teachers in this research have shown they are prepared to put their beliefs into practice. They have acted on the belief that they *have time* for parents, by *making time* to involve themselves with parents in the education of their children. The interconnectedness of beliefs and practices is an area for further research to determine the extent to which teacher actions are determined by their beliefs: to find the point at which beliefs guide changes in practices as evidenced through the implementation of action research in this project. *Time for parents* has been shown to be both a belief and a practice across all levels (K-12). Reality and rhetoric have met head on in two classrooms, the everyday workplace and the classroom of professional development with the result of increased teacher confidence which may be further influenced by gender or year level. Only time will tell!

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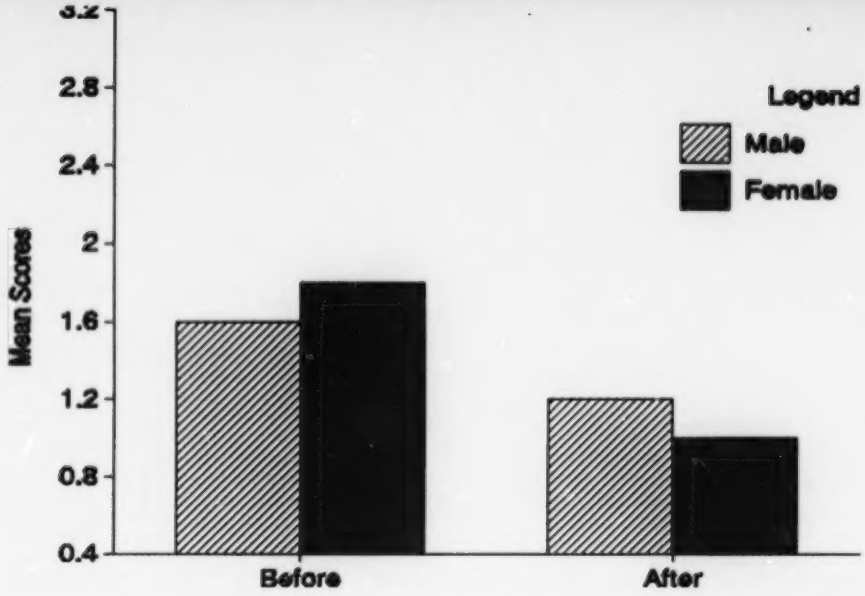
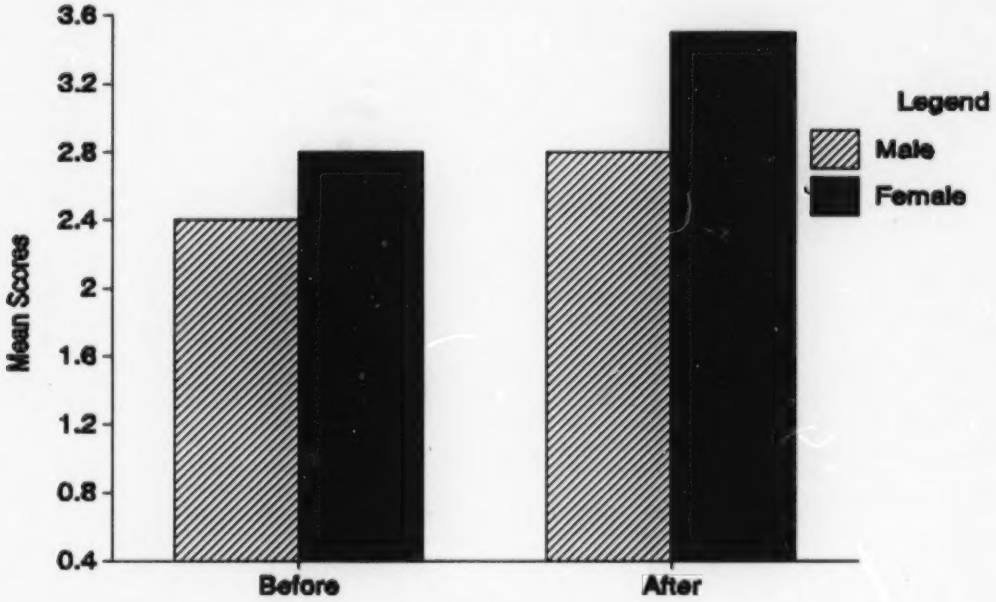
APPENDIX A GENDER GRAPHS

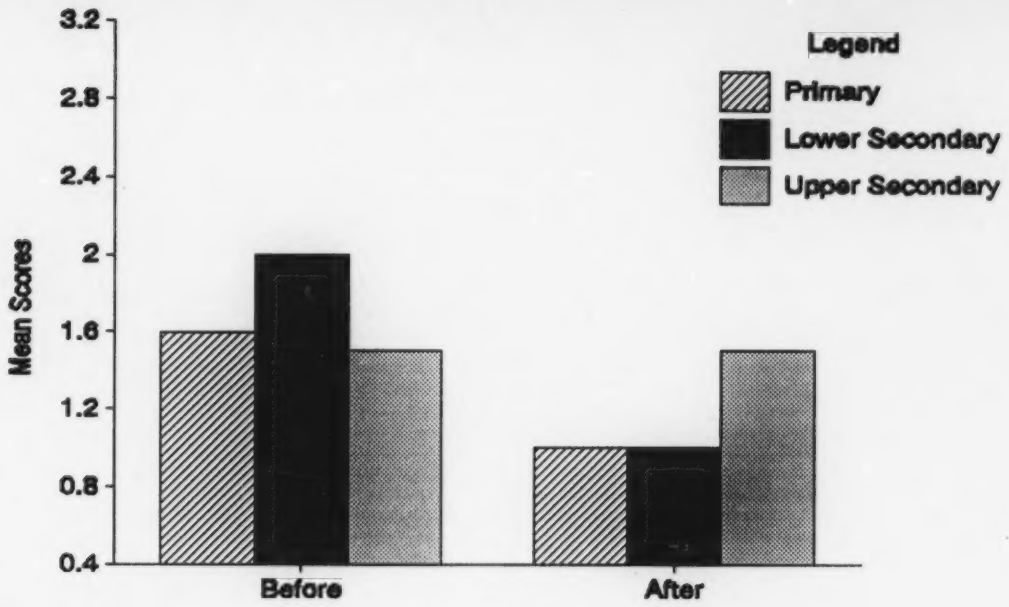


Item 6 Students learn the most when parents and teachers work together.



Item 7 Teachers have enough to do without having to try to involve parents.

APPENDIX B YEAR LEVEL GRAPHS



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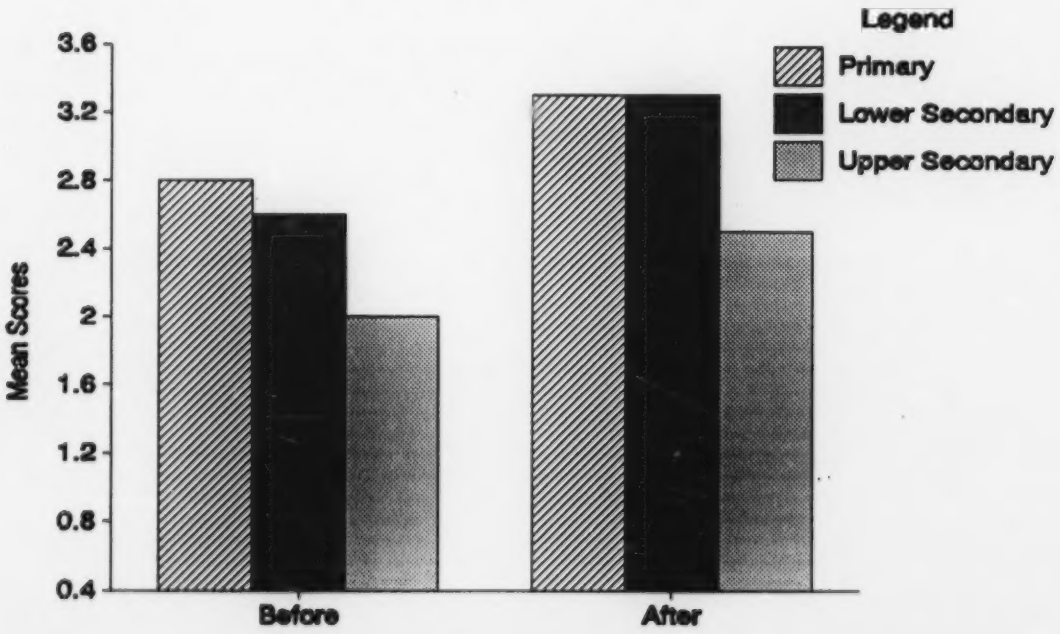
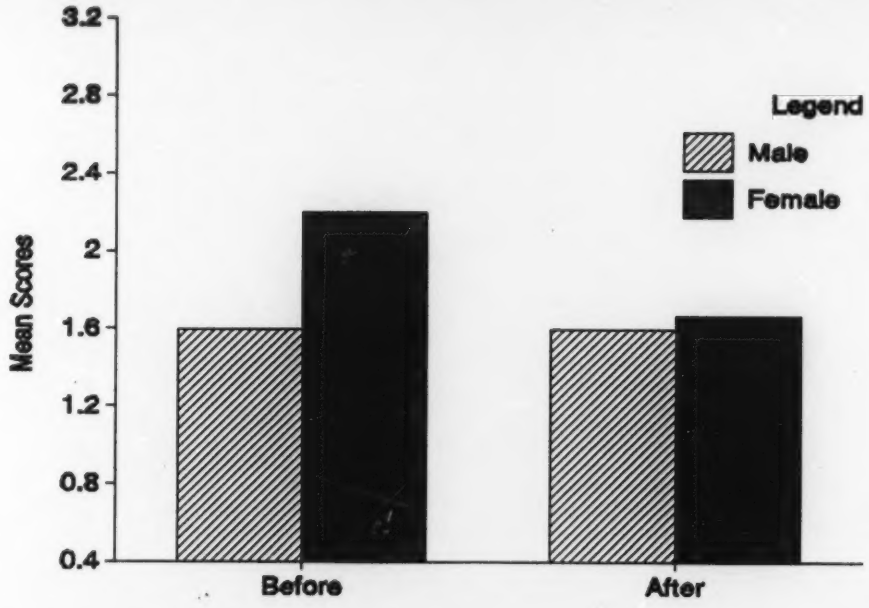
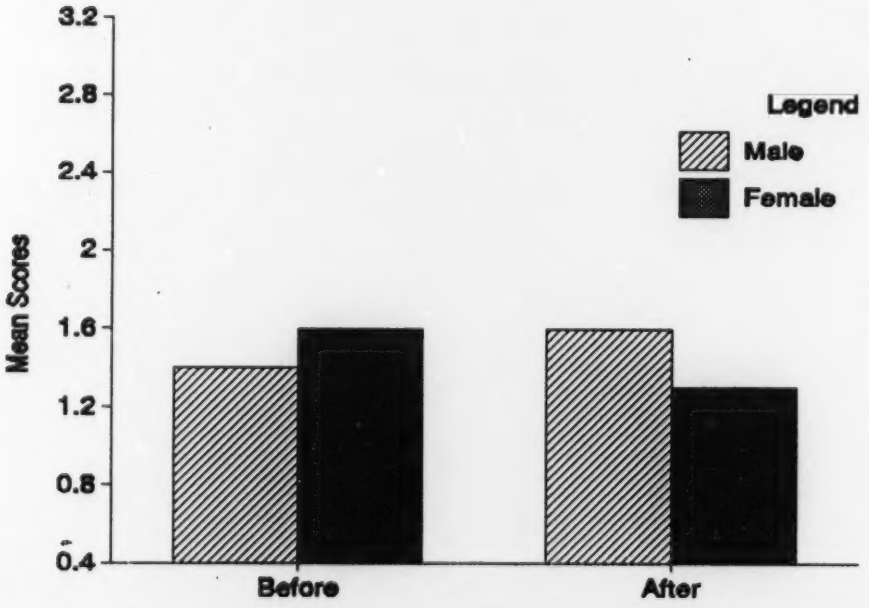


Item 7 Teachers have enough to do without having to try to involve parents.

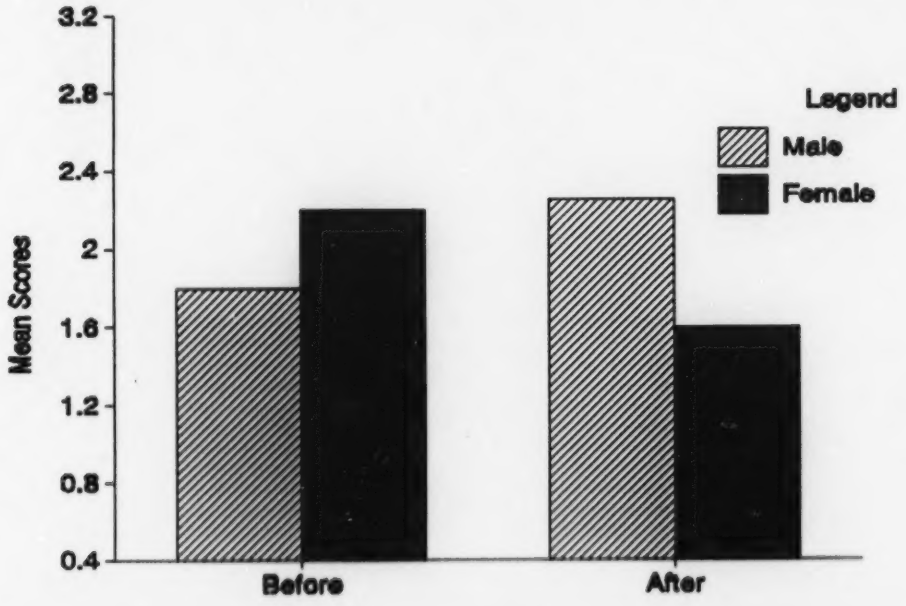
APPENDIX C GENDER GRAPHS



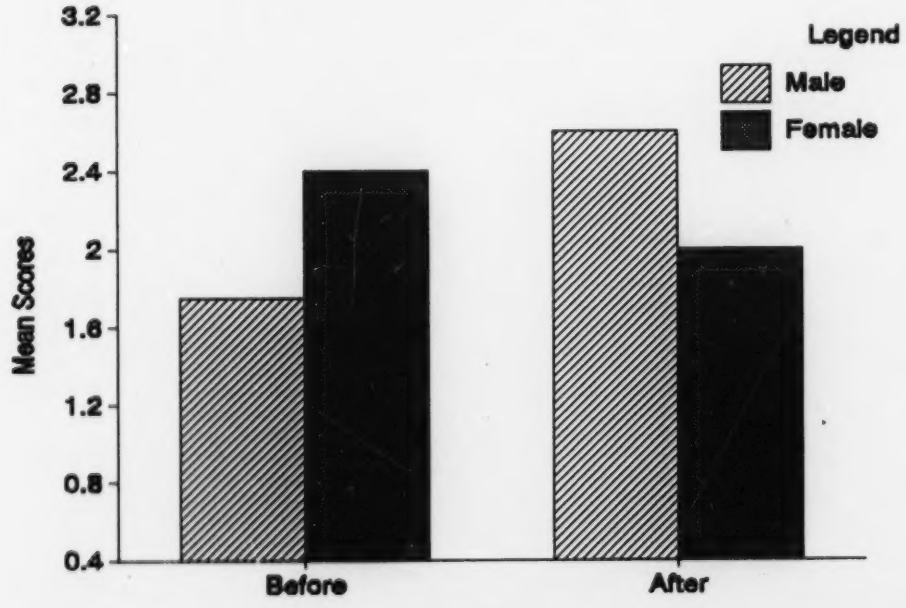
Item 9 I am confident that the parents of my students respect me as a competent teacher.



Item 10 I am confident that the parents of my students care about their children.

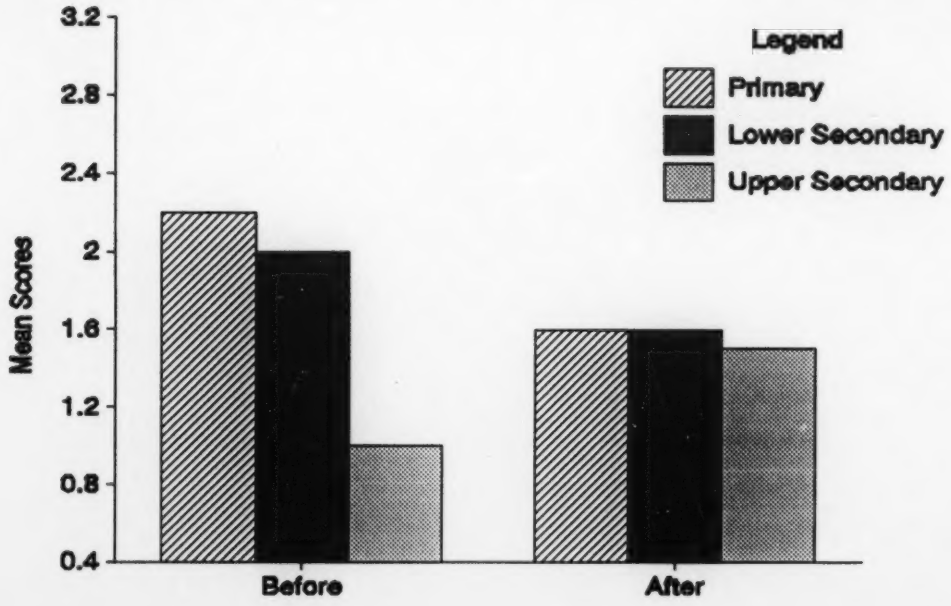


Item 14 I am confident that the parents of my students are doing a good job in encouraging their children to have positive attitudes toward learning.



Item 16 I am confident that the parents of my students are doing a good job in participating in their children's education.

APPENDIX D YEAR LEVEL GRAPHS



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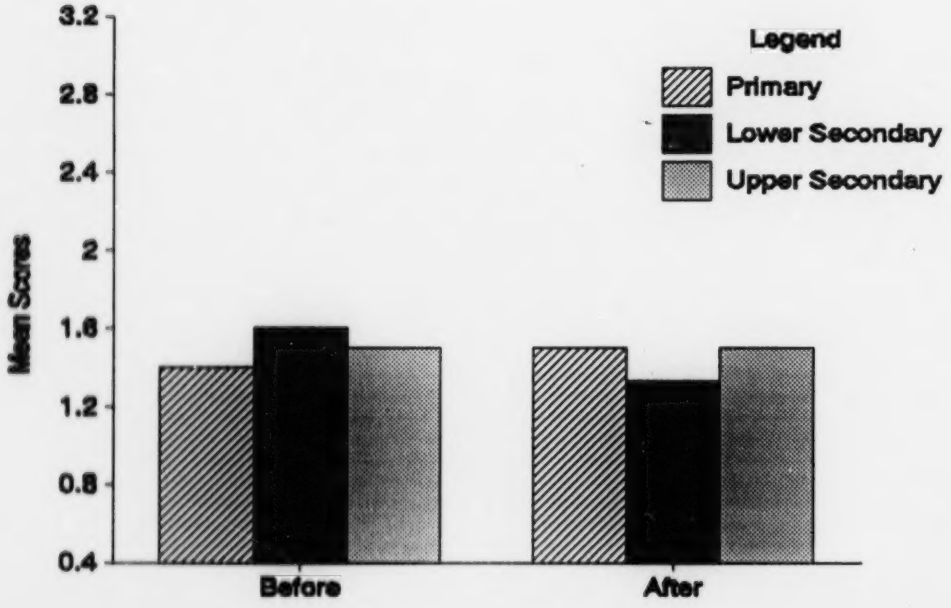

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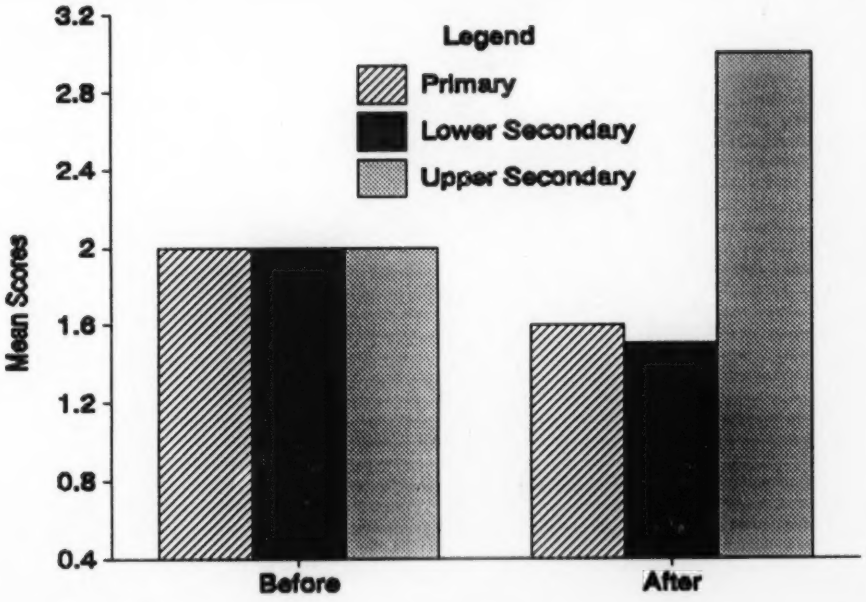

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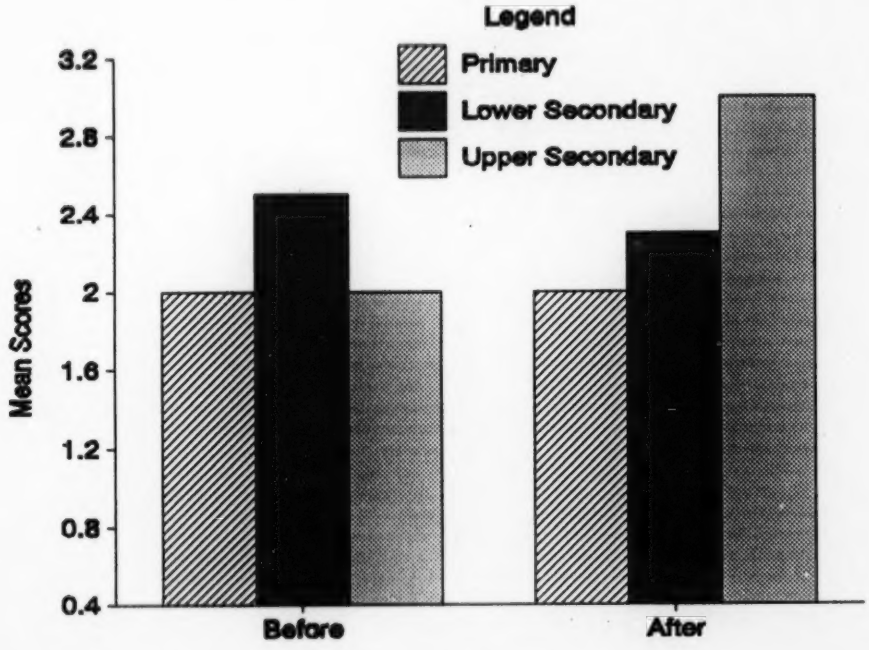

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